

A Course on Effective Teacher-Child Interactions

Bridget K. Hamre, Robert C. Pianta, Margaret Burchinal, Samuel Field, Jennifer LoCasale-Crouch, Jason T. Downer, Carollee Howes, Karen LaParo, & Catherine Scott-Little

This study found that teachers who were randomly assigned to take a 14-week course on effective teacher-child interactions demonstrated significant changes in beliefs and knowledge about effective practices and provided more stimulating and engaging interactions in the classroom.

Early education research has converged on effective teacher-child interactions as essential to promoting young children's development. These interactions are the daily back-and-forth exchanges between teachers and children throughout each day, which can be both social and instructional in nature. High quality interactions in which teachers provide ongoing feedback to children, facilitate children's language and vocabulary, and encourage students to think, for example, lead to greater growth in preschoolers pre-reading and math skills. However, national data suggest that the average preschooler is likely to experience teacher-child interactions of mediocre to low quality.

Little evidence has been found so far that a link exists between college coursework in early childhood education and teachers' likelihood to engage in high-quality interactions with children. Teachers holding a bachelor's degree in early childhood education are typically no better at these interactions than are teachers holding only an associate's degree. Neither is there much evidence that typical professional development opportunities (such as courses and workshops) produce improvements in the quality of teacher-child interactions.

Researchers in the Center for Advanced Study of Teaching and Learning, working in partnership with the National Center for Research on Early Childhood Education (NCRECE), developed a 14-week college course and then conducted research to see if the

course could be shown in a rigorous, randomized control trial to improve teacher practice.

The Course

The course was based on the framework of the Classroom Assessment Scoring System™ (CLASS), an instrument used to measure observed teacher-child interactions. The goals of this course were twofold:

1. Help teachers understand that all interactions with children, whether social, organization, or instructional, serve as a foundation for early language and literacy development.
2. Provide teachers with knowledge about and examples of instructional interactions and activities that are focused directly on enhancing children's development of language and literacy skills.

Course developers advanced the belief that teachers must be actively engaged in interactions with children in order for learning to occur. Teachers who believe they should take a more passive role in children's learning are unlikely to engage in intentional teacher-child interactions. Thus, the course materials provided examples from research and videos highlighting how cognitive and language development can be enhanced through intentional teacher-child interactions.

The course focused on developing the skills to identify effective interactions with a high degree of specificity so teachers would be more likely to change their practice as a result of their coursework. Teachers

The National Center for Research on Early Childhood Education (NCRECE) is engaged in a program of research on professional development for early childhood educators that tests the efficacy of approaches to increasing teachers' effective use of social and instructional interactions.

watched videos in which they analyzed the extent to which high-quality interactions were present or absent. Homework assignments included readings, as well as watching and analyzing additional videos online.

The Study

The study included 440 preschool teachers at 10 sites across the U.S. There were 217 teachers randomly assigned to the control condition (which received no coursework on the topic of teacher-child interactions) and 223 teachers randomly assigned to the course condition.

Instructors at each course site were provided with curriculum that included PowerPoint presentations, videos, and written assignments. They attended a weeklong training session and were provided with ongoing support by NCRECE staff. Their classes were periodically videotaped to ensure they were teaching according to plan.

Teachers in both groups took written end-of-course assessments regarding their knowledge of effective teacher-child interactions, their skills in detecting effective interactions through observation, their knowledge about literacy and language skills, and their beliefs about the importance of children possessing these skills as they enter kindergarten.

In addition, videotapes of their classroom practices were scored using CLASS observation instrument.

Results

Results showed that teachers who took the course displayed better knowledge about effective interactions than did teachers in the control group, and they were better able to identify multiple aspects of effective instruction in videos. They also were more likely to report a belief that language and literacy skills were essential to young children's development and displayed greater knowledge about these skills.

Teachers who took the course were observed using more emotionally supportive interactions and more strategies that facilitate children's higher order thinking skills in their own classroom practice. They were not observed, however, demonstrating significantly better classroom organization and management interactions.

Teachers who took the course provided more intensive and frequent feedback and better supported children's language development—all aspects of the classroom environment that appear to have the strongest associations with children's early literacy, language, and cognitive development. There were no significant differences in the use of explicit and purposeful literacy interactions. Both groups used these types of interactions infrequently.

The course was equally effective across teachers with less than an associate's degree as well as those with advanced degrees.

Conclusion

This study is among the few to show direct effects of a course on early childhood teachers' use of effective teaching practices. Courses offer an advantage over more intensive options, such as coaching, in that they are less expensive to implement and easier to integrate into existing teacher licensure systems. In light of the need for professional development opportunities that can be disseminated broadly, it is important that the courses teachers take are focused on practice and actually change the ways they teach.

For more information, go to curry.virginia.edu/castl

This research brief is based on the paper noted below and supported by the Institute of Education Sciences, U.S. Department of Education, through Grant R305A060021 to the University of Virginia. The opinions expressed are those of the authors and do not represent views of the U.S. Department of Education.

A full report of this study may be found at Hamre, B.K., Pianta, R.C., Burchinal, M., Field, S., LoCasale-Crouch, J., Downer, J.T., Howes, C., LaParo, K., & Scott-Little, C. (2012). A course on effective teacher-child interactions: Effects on teacher beliefs, knowledge, and observed practice. *American Educational Research Journal*, 49(1), 88-123.